



Second Sunday in Ordinary Time January 20, 2013 C

What makes marriage work?

Marriage experts and everyday couples offer tried and true tips

The following are some excerpts from an article by Bob Zyskowski which appeared in the July 2004 edition of the magazine *U.S. Catholic*.

Maureen Rogers and Lanny Law, caught in a sudden downpour, took shelter in a little café and warmed up with some tea. After several hours of conversation—and several pots of tea—Maureen and Lanny knew they wanted to be together. Some 20 years have passed since that tea-filled heart-to-heart talk, but when Maureen phones her husband to say she’s on her way home, Lanny’s ready reply is, “I’ll put the teapot on.” For Maureen, that simple phrase, loaded with memories and meaning, tells her she is still loved by the man she fell in love with.

Is that all it takes for you and your spouse to have a successful marriage—just some schmaltzy words and fond memories? Hardly, according to experts who study the dynamics of marriage relationships. But it doesn’t hurt to take part in a little ritual only the two of you share. Similar words and actions that show love and respect, care and concern, interest and affection are all part of the answer to the question: What “works” to keep a marriage together and growing?

Since today more than 40 percent of first-time marriages fail, married couples continue to need both an understanding about what it takes to make their marriages last and some suggestions to help them make the journey together.

Chances are you are already doing some of these. Try others on for size, but don’t go into this thinking there is one little trick you can learn to turn your married life into paradise.

Maureen Law, now a marriage and family therapist in private practice in Minnesota, warns against cookie-cutter answers.

“People are more complex than easy solutions,” she says. “The one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t cut it. But if there’s a bedrock to the relationship, simple things do work.”

For Law, married to fellow therapist Lanny for more than 20 years, having a bedrock means “truly knowing the other person cares deeply about you.”

Here are 10 tried-and-true tips:

1. Be able to tell each other how you feel.

Happily married couples know their spouse is not trying to hurt them by expressing his or her own feelings.

Helping couples express feelings is what Mary Jo Pedersen, a marriage and family spirituality specialist with the Family Life Office of the Archdiocese of Omaha, does in her workshops. “Once you’ve developed the ability to share how you feel about an issue of contention, you’ve reached a place of intimacy where you can start building instead of fighting,” she says.

2. Be intentional about forming an “us.”

Partners in a successful marriage work at being a couple. They do things together—work in the garden, attend a concert or sporting event, even paint or clean the house—because shared activities make them feel bonded. They take time to have intellectual intimacy by sharing ideas, talking about what each other is reading, or sharing what they got out of a book or movie.

The Margelofskys of Wisconsin work at togetherness. Mark loves to golf but Liza never had. Mark taught her to play so they could enjoy the sport and the time together. When Liza works late at the supper club, Mark puts the boys to sleep, then stays up to hear Liza’s “winding-down” story of her day.

A continuing education class offered them support for making time for themselves as a couple, Liza says.

“Mark took a class designed to help teachers with students of divorced parents,” she says, “and one of the keys that struck us both is that our relationship comes first. The class taught us that when we put our marriage first, we’re not hurting the children but showing them how to love your spouse above all else.”

3. Deal well with conflict.

Pedersen, who gives couple’s retreats all over the country, finds that resolving conflict is among the key pieces to the happy-marriage puzzle.

*“Every healthy marriage has conflict,” Pedersen says. “You have two intelligent, rational people coming upon problems and seeing them in different ways. It’s **how** you deal with conflict that makes a marriage last.”*

*Pedersen says John Gottman, author of **Why Marriages Succeed and Fail**, has it right when he talks*

about “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” that are lethal to marriage.

- Criticism (“You are so sloppy, it’s hard for me to feel like I want to do the laundry when your clothes are all over the floor”).
- Contempt (being sarcastic or cynical).
- Defensiveness (blaming the other person).
- Stonewalling (the silent treatment; refusing to talk about the problem; saying, “Whatever,” then walking away).

What about the old saying that goes, “Never go to sleep angry with your spouse”?

The Laws joke that you could end up losing a lot of sleep. It’s not bad advice for problems that are solvable, and that’s where learning some conflict resolution skills is important, they say.

But some problems won’t be solved before midnight or even 3 a.m., and Maureen Law suggests it’s OK on some issues to say, let’s work on this some more tomorrow.

“But before you go to sleep, affirm your love,” Law says.

4. Pay attention to issues of sexuality.

Sex is at or near the top of the list of issues that cause conflict in marriages. Married couples are reluctant to offer their expertise and experience on record about this topic. Experts in the marriage field say this is not uncommon.

“A lot of couples do not feel free to talk about sexual issues,” Pedersen says. “There are many married couples who don’t have sex often at all. They don’t attend to it, and it undermines the emotional life of the marriage. Couples who do attend to their sex lives are less likely to have an affair interrupt their marriage. The promise of sexual intimacy in marriage is the promise to fulfill the human desire for intimacy.”

Attending to it, Pedersen says, means being able to talk with your spouse when you are dissatisfied. She specifically advises couples dealing with issues of sexuality to read **Sheet Music: Uncovering the Secrets of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage** by Dr. Kevin Leman (Tyndale).

“It’s about improving your sex life,” she says. “It’s very specific, but it’s not a manual. From a Christian perspective, sexual intimacy can be a window to the divine for the couple. Allowing yourself to be naked and making a gift of yourself to your spouse is a deeply spiritual action, one that puts you in touch with how God loves us—totally and selflessly. When we give the gift of self to another we are imaging God.

5. Pay attention to the spiritual dimension in your marriage.

A number of studies by secular entities show that couples who have common religious practices and share common faith beliefs and practices have longer, more satisfying marriages. Couples with successful marriages talk about what they believe about their union and how they believe God is present in their marriage.

6. Reinforce your mutual fondness and admiration.

Though driven to distraction at times by a spouse’s flaws, happily marrieds still feel the person they wed is worthy of honor and respect. The experts recommend reminding yourself frequently of your spouse’s positive qualities, what makes you cherish him or her. Research by the University of Washington’s Gottman says couples who see their marriage’s history in a positive light are 94 percent more likely to be happy in the future.

“Mark and I do this on a regular basis,” reports Liza Margelofsky. “We have talks probably monthly, usually before bed, reminding each other of how we met, what we like about each other, funny things that happened in our first months of dating, and why I ‘knew’ that Mark was the one I would marry.”

Larry Anderson expresses it succinctly: “I think my wife is very talented, and she has always made me feel special.”

7. Do little niceties for one another.

The Andersons say Larry frequently will bring Marcy coffee in bed on Saturday or Sunday mornings. On weekdays, Marcy reciprocates. Although Larry starts his job very early and Marcy starts work later, she’ll get up at 5:15 a.m. to keep him company while he gets ready for work.

And Maureen Law says every time she arrives home after a trip to the store, her husband Lanny helps carry in the groceries. Without being asked.

8. Build a firm foundation for compromising.

Successful married couples know that if either person closes his or her ears to the other’s needs, opinions, and values, they cannot resolve their differences. They respect one another enough to listen to the other’s point of view and take it into account.

The Margelofskys say they learned two things: First, that marriage takes work; and second, that it’s not always easy.

“No matter how upset or frustrated we might be with each other,” Liza says, “it is part of being married, and those minor things will never break us apart. We learned that divorce is not a word we ever use regarding ourselves. We both truly believe we will be together until death, as God intended.”

William Doherty, author of *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart*, writes: “Commitment no-matter-what means I am faithful to a flawed human being who is faithful to me as a flawed human being in a moral covenant that does not have a lemon clause and does not permit leasing and trade-ins. And it means we never stop working on being married.”

9. Think and act like a team.

There is a sense of fairness and justice about the married life of happy couples. They appreciate the culture and rituals of married life together and see how they are bonded in an inner life, linked by role and goals. They understand and value what it means to be a part of the family they have become.

The most stable marriages are those in which the husband respects his wife by listening to her and considering her needs, opinions, and values, and in which they share power and decision-making. Marriages where the husband resists sharing power are four times more likely to end in divorce or to drone on unhappily.

Through 33 years of marriage, the McCormick's of Oak Forest have held onto a philosophy that has staying power.

“We think of our marriage as a play with many acts, characters, and scenery changes,” they explain. “Situations of calm and chaos, joy and sorrow fill the plot; yet, sharing the lead at various times, we always hold true to our core values of truth, faith, and love.”

10. Seek out a supportive community.

Pedersen reinforces one of author Doherty's key points by encouraging couples to find and be part of a community of couples that support each other. She and her husband David have for the past 21 years made a couples retreat with the same seven couples.

Marriage Encounter in particular has a lengthy track record, having helped millions of couples ‘Make a good marriage great,’ as the program's slogan states. A Marriage Encounter weekend is designed to bring husband and wife together to communicate lovingly in an atmosphere where the focus is on their relationship.

The Christian Family Movement is another highly successful organization prepared to help couples join a support group for their marriage or to help them organize one. An outgrowth of the Catholic Action movement of the 1940s, CFM has developed into a national network of parish/neighborhood small groups of families. Parents meet regularly in each other's homes. Programs and group activities promote and reinforce Christ-centered marriage and family life. For an outline of a typical CFM meeting, go to www.cfm.org or call 812-962-5508.

Retrouvaille is a ministry to hurting marriages that has saved thousands of couples. For more information about *Retrouvaille*, call our Family Life office at 407-246-4865—www.retrouvaille.org.

15 Ideas to Keep Your Marriage on Track

1. Make decisions after using a 1 to 10 scale. Say your child has gotten a speeding ticket and, to reinforce that there are consequences to that behavior, you are considering removing driving privileges. You say a week is enough; your spouse says a month. Both of you decide how strongly you feel about your position. Are you adamant—a 10—or flexible—a 3? As you each number your position, you can see just how far apart you are. As each of you explains why you feel that way, understanding the other's thinking happens along with the possibility to negotiate a compromise.

2. When you disagree about an important issue you find difficult to talk about, write down your feelings and share them with each other. It will enhance understanding and make it easier to talk about why you feel the way you do.

3. Make a list of the way your spouse blesses your life. Share it with him or her, and keep a copy for yourself. Add to the list whenever the spirit moves you.

4. Compliment your spouse, in private and especially in front of others.

5. Tell your spouse how the spouse lets you know he or she loves you.

6. List the important relationships in your life. Using a scale of 1-10, with 1 being highest, put a number next to each person's name. Note the highest scores and see if these relationships compete with your No. 1 priority, your spouse. Share and compare your list with your spouse.

7. Talk to your spouse about the types of touch—inside and outside the bedroom—he or she (and you) do and do not enjoy.

8. Talk about sexual intimacy before, during and after making love. Your aim as a couple is that intimacy be mutually beneficial, so affirm the good and talk about how to modify what isn't.

9. Nonsexual touch can be wonderfully intimate. Leaning up against each other's body, kissing, holding, embracing, rubbing each other's back or neck—all help to deeply connect marital partners.

10. Surprise your spouse by doing a household chore he or she usually does.

11. Ask your spouse to teach you how to do one of the tasks he or she normally does so that you can handle it occasionally.

12. *Get the bugs out. If there is something your spouse did in the past that continues to cause resentment, find a good time to talk about it, telling exactly how you feel. Than get over it.*

13. *Remember times when you were forgiven for a mistake, and recall how you felt. Share that feeling by offering forgiveness to your spouse.*

14. *Think about the good times and bad times in your married life.*

15. *Go to bed at the same time.*

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Sharing questions for couples

- What spoke to you most in the article?
- What is the glue that keeps your marriage together?
- What is the biggest challenge you face as you work together to keep your marriage strong and healthy?

Advice for dating couples. Share with me 2, 3, or 5 pieces of advice you would offer someone if they asked you: How do I know this is the right guy/gal for me? What behaviors are red flag signs?

Have a blessed week,

